



BEGOTTEN

A FILM BY E. ELIAS MERHIGE



BEGOTTEN

COMPLEX CORPORATION presents **BEGOTTEN** A film by **E. ELIAS MERHIGE**
With **BRIAN SALZBERG** **DONNA DEMPSEY** **STEPHEN CHARLES BARRY**
Director of Photography and Film Effects **E. ELIAS MERHIGE**
Sound by **EVAN ALBAM** Art Direction by **HARRY DUGGINS**
A Production of **THEATREOFMATERIAL**
Written, produced and directed by **E. ELIAS MERHIGE**
A WORLD ARTISTS RELEASE

Chapters

(So named by the Author)

1. I see Everything and Nothing.
2. Begotten
3. The Black Lake
4. The White Bird
5. The House
6. The Alpha and the Omega
7. All Seeing; No Dreaming
8. A Close Shave
9. One Soul, One Body, One Spirit
10. I am Dying. Yet this Stone Wall Lives. How can this Be?
11. Who Will Wash My Feet?
12. Is it Adam, Who Reaches for a Guide?
13. No, It is My Mother.
14. Basking in the Light of a Sun you do not yet Know.
15. Made Chaste by the Sun, She is Led to Her Groom.
16. The Dew from His Blood will Renovate You.
17. One Becomes free through the Other and is Led to Life again.
18. Coffin chasing the Womb.
19. Inside the Darkness of Her Womb, the Sun is Hidden.
20. The Garden of Hesperides.

21. A Son is Born.
22. Seek and Ye Shall Find.
23. Humble Beginnings for **One** so Great.
24. Struck Dumb. They wait for a Sign.
25. They steal Him from the Garden.
26. And again return from Above, To That **which is Below**.
27. The quarrelling of Fools.
28. Fools be still. He is our Bread, Salt, and Water.
29. See with your own Eyes; the many Gifts of His.
30. Clothed in a Cloak of Glory, the whole **world** seeks Him.
31. That which is Light rises. That which is Heavy sinks.
Each one has its place.
32. Fire and Water
33. Air and Earth
34. The Extraction
35. What's been Hidden and Lost must be Found.
36. Out of His suffering comes the Harmony of the Elements.
37. He is the **One**.
38. He is brought with care to the Land of Nod.
39. A forest at the Edge of Eden.
40. Certain Forces outside of **Eden**.
41. The Sun becomes hidden and Harmony is Lost.
42. Who will restore the Harmony?

43. The Fallen Bride.
44. That which possesses Soul **and Spirit** here on Earth,
Remains entirely undisturbed.
45. From Her dying Body,
Flow the Rivers of Life.
46. Do not Weep. I shall draw all Things which perish into myself
When I am lifted from the Earth.
47. Who would believe that in the Land of Rotting Flesh
and Stinking Mud, The Finer Work begins.
48. Those Things not yet Born,
Begin their journey here.
49. All Flesh that came Into the World
Took its origin from Earth.
50. Son of Earth must again become Earth.
And consequently also Ashes.
51. Because He who dies with me, is Led to Life again.
52. There is no Silence in Death.
53. The Flood
54. The Planting
55. Through their Wounds we are Healed.
Our Work is Complete.
56. End Titles Begin

ELIAS MERHIGE

Interviewed by Scott MacDonald

In June 1992, during a trip to Vienna to interview Martin Arnold, I discovered that the Stadtkino Theater was in the midst of a retrospective of American independent cinema, including both avant-garde film (this section of the retrospective had been curated by Steve Anker of the San Francisco Cinematheque) and of experimental narrative and documentary. The retrospective, called "Unknown Territories," was organized by the Stadtkino Theater and by Martin Arnold, Brigitta Burger-Utzer, and Peter Tscherkassky, all members of SIXPACK, a Viennese collective that supports alternative film production and exhibition. The retrospective was accompanied by elaborate program notes, available from SIXPACK, as well as a special issue of *Blimp* (no. 20, which includes overviews by Tom Gunning, David Sterritt, and Anker). On the first evening of our stay in Vienna, Pat [Patricia O'Connor, MacDonald's wife] and I decided to fight the combination of jet lag and beer and see a bit of *Begotten* (1989), Elias Merhige's experimental narrative feature, which I had read about (the film had premiered at New York City's Film Forum in 1990) but had not seen — we were too exhausted to commit to more than ten or fifteen minutes of the film.

Begotten begins with a long, slow, highly formal, unusually visceral sequence in extremely grainy black and white — Merhige calls the sequence "God Killing Himself" — during which a bizarre being disembowels itself, limbs flailing in agony. I found the sequence gorgeous in some mysterious way, and despite my fatigue, I knew almost immediately that nothing was going to get me out of the theater until *Begotten* was over. As I turned to Pat, who has limited patience for violence and for slow, formalist work, to tell her, she looked at me and said, "There's no way you're going to get me to leave!" That *Begotten* is Merhige's first feature makes it all the more remarkable, and the fact that it was allowed to slide quickly into obscurity, all the more frustrating (*Begotten* had a second premiere in LA early in 1995, and is now available on video).



Begotten is one of few films that effectively combines several usually distinct traditions in alternative cinema. First, it is in the tradition of the psychodrama and visionary cinema that P. Adams Sitney explores in *Visionary Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). As Mother Nature, who is born out of the death of God, struggles through one bleak landscape after another, she becomes a projection of both filmmaker and viewer mythically coming to grips with the stern realities of life. *Begotten* is also closely related to Viennese "Actionism" and the "material action films" of Otto Mühl and Kurt Kren (the group that collaborated with Merhige was called "Theatre of material"), where the repressions of the psyche within society find outlet in the

performers' engagement with paint, milk, blood, piss, shit. Mother Nature, like so many of the characters in the materialactionfilms, is immersed in material substances, as she drags herself and is dragged by others through Merhige's nightmare world. Finally, *Begotten* is in the tradition of films that explore the materiality of the filmstrip. The gritty, grainy textures of Merhige's images recall Ernie Gehr's *Reverberation* (1969) and Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969, revised in 1971). In general, *Begotten* hovers between traditions, creating an ambiguous experience that challenges viewers' sense of decency, their ability to understand, and their patience — while simultaneously providing both narrative fascination and sensual engagement with the film's remarkable chiaroscuro.

I spoke with Merhige in December of 1993, in Utica, New York, after a screening of *Begotten*. That conversation was supplemented with letters and phone calls.

MacDonald: What is, or was, the Theatreofmaterial, the group that made *Begotten*?

Merhige: While I was in school [State University of New York at Purchase] I spent a lot of time in Manhattan looking at performance. It always intrigued me when people visualized situations not just to tell a dramatic, linear story but to create some sort of otherworldly response. I'd love it when I found myself thinking, "I can't believe I'm looking at this!"

MacDonald: What performances do you remember particularly?

Merhige: A Japanese dance troupe called Sankui Juku. I was very moved by their work. I learned that they had a core group of people who worked together, slept together, ate together — did everything together. They knew each other thoroughly and not just on a professional basis. That fascinated me, and I wanted to achieve something similar. To what extent I was successful I don't know. If you are able to bring diverse minds and talents together, it's a miracle to have them for whatever time you have them. And that's what brought me to make *Begotten* into a film, as opposed to a theater piece: I could already sense that some of the people were moving on to other things. Also, I wanted a permanent record of our work.

Specifically, the people in the Theatreofmaterial were sculptors, painters, actors. They were all in touch with modes of theatrical expression that were not conventional and were not centered around dialogue. We were interested in emotions on the fringes, emotions most directors and artists will not deal with. We wanted to give character and architecture to regions of the soul that are normally considered No Man's Land, the Unknown.



We did many exercises together — breathing exercises, for example, where we would breathe to the point of hysteria and create these moments of panic. Afterwards, we would analyze what the experience was all about. It was an intimate science.

The writing for *Begotten* was all Vision material, or whatever you want to call it, and I used those parts that scared me, or that I just couldn't understand — the parts that stuck with me for days and that forced me to wonder *where within me did this come from?* A tableau of the unknown was important to me. Then it

was a matter of arranging this material as a myth. That was important, too. It began as a personal myth and ended as a collective myth, a myth of everyone involved in making the film.

At first I didn't think to bring my writing together with the group work. But in the process of working with these people, the two came together. We began to rehearse excerpts of the writings. First, I would read the material as a poet would read it; then we'd talk about it; and then we would break it down into its physical elements.

MacDonald: Did you rehearse for a long time and then shoot very intensively over a short period of time?

Merhige: Yes. The rehearsals were not so much to get the choreography perfect, but to get us all in tune with one another, so that our relationship to one another would become instinctual, as opposed to just professional. It became a tribal relationship. By the end of the four and a half months, we were so used to one another that there was nothing anyone could do or say that would be embarrassing or awkward.

It was winter at the time, and we rehearsed a lot indoors. When spring came, we made preparations to go outdoors, which in the end added a whole different element. That's when the film came together: the script began to dissolve away, to move into the distance, and the emotion of the sky and the earth and the climate mingled with the group. Another entity came out of that. And finishing the costumes — the masks — helped people get into the roles even more deeply.

MacDonald: How long did you shoot?

Merhige: About five and a half months, mostly on weekends. We really looked forward to each three-day weekend—you got the feeling that this was the most meaningful part of our lives at the time. I think that comes through in the film.

MacDonald: The opening sequence feels a little like a prologue, not just to the narrative that develops once the birth of Nature has taken place, but to your own exploration of texture, grain, light, rhythm.

Merhige: The opening twelve minutes, *God Killing Himself* and *Mother Earth's* birth, were shot first. I cut that together, and it got everyone excited. I think it proved to everyone that this was an important film, that there really was nothing else like it, and that we were actually going to make it happen. It wasn't an intellectual reaction, it was excitement. And I really needed that because people were working for nothing — even the art director and the costume designer, both of whom were professionals. Basically, everybody worked for excellent dinners that my mother made and a place to sleep. Also, all their expenses were paid.

MacDonald: And you raised that money how?

Merhige: Raised the money? Well, first of all, I had twenty thousand dollars that my grandfather had left me for medical school. I decided I wanted to use it for this. That took care of many of the initial raw costs. I had done special effects work and had been able to accumulate some money doing that, which I put into the film. Actually, money was never a problem. What took so long was not the money, but the time involved getting the optical printer working exactly the right way for the project and getting the imagery and the sound together.



MacDonald: Once you had shot the film, what was the process?

Merhige: I would say that on the average, it took between eight to ten hours of optical work for every minute of finished film that you see.

MacDonald: Exactly what kind of work?

Merhige: Analyzing the footage, deciding on the best shots, doing tests, sending those tests off to the lab—if the lab was off that day by a degree or two, the whole relationship between the blacks and whites in a particular sequence would be changed. Often, I had to reshoot material that didn't match what had been done previously.



I worked with an optical printer that I put together myself. At different special effects places where I had worked on and off, I was able to find parts that no one else was using: a gate from an old Italian printer, an old Mitchell camera from 1936, too clumsy to use for shooting, but with perfect registration for an optical printer. I was

able to mount the whole thing onto a very heavy iron rack system to keep everything steady. A machinist friend was able to machine mounts to certain specifications. Getting the whole thing working took close to eight months.

MacDonald: After the shooting?

Merhige: Yes.

MacDonald: Who have you done special effects for?

Merhige: I did one roscope for a Disney show I never knew the name of. Jobs like that pay very well.

MacDonald: Did you study special effects at SUNY-Purchase?

Merhige: No. I've always been able to see something in my mind and create it on film. I have a knack for translating ideas into photographic images. A lot of directors have an idea and know how to write it, but have a problem translating it visually. For me, it's more difficult to write. That's why the first ten minutes of *Begotten* were so important. After that I didn't have to explain anything.

MacDonald: You work with "material" on several levels. Of course, the characters are clothed in material, and they move through various kinds of material within the events you portray. But at what point in the process did you become involved with the material of the celluloid, in terms of texture and chiaroscuro?

Merhige: That was a part of my psyche in every stage of making the film. If I couldn't create the film the way I saw it, I didn't want to make it. I knew the style with which the images would reveal themselves was as integral as the story itself: the story wouldn't work without it.

The idea of time working on the surface of the medium itself was important to me. I wanted to create a sense that the film was going through its own trial, its own sufferings. The idea of ruins, of things falling apart—not because of the overt violence of one body against another, but through the subtle violence of time—has always fascinated me. I wanted *Begotten* to look, not as if it were from the twenties, not even as if it were from the nineteenth century, but as if it were from the time of Christ, as if it were a cinematic Dead Sea Scroll that had been buried in the

sands, a remnant of a culture with customs and rites that no longer apply to this culture, yet are somewhere *underneath* it, under the surface of what we call "reality."

MacDonald: When I first saw *Begotten* in Vienna, I thought to myself — after about five minutes of the film — "I don't know where this is going and it scares the hell out of me, but there's no way I'm not sitting through it!"

Merhige: The whole idea of a movie is that you want people to *watch*. Everything about the events I'm depicting in *Begotten* is repellent. The viewer naturally wants to look away, to leave. If you verbalized the story, it would be hard to find anyone who'd say, "Oh yeah, visualize *that* — I'd really like to see *that*." But making the unpalatable palatable is the challenge. It's easy to show things that everybody is drawn to, but to show things that people are immediately repelled by *and* keep them in their seats is exciting. I hoped I could keep the audience by making the film beautiful to look at in a formal sense. I knew if I were sloppy in any stage of it — the costumes, the photography, the sound — people would leave. If I didn't stay with it, why should *they*?



MacDonald: The ambiguity of the plot contributes to the film's eerie violence.

Merhige: A lot of people have had trouble with the violence in the film. Of course, some people do feel that there is a ritualized necessity to what is happening, that a group is working together as a form of collective sacrifice or collective expiation of some guilt, or of sin, or of some energy that must be given form.

As an artist, I've always felt that violence exists on many different levels. When I see flowers or grass coming through concrete or brick walls, I know that violence has occurred. Yes, it has taken place over a long period of time, but still there is destruction, a violent display. It's always form revealing itself, form wanting itself seen and assessed. Life is always struggling for recognition from its surroundings, and it's there to validate those surroundings.

MacDonald: The journey of these characters seems endless, as does your commitment in the style. Is it fair to say that the figure we follow during *Begotten* is a metaphor for you making the film, for your dragging yourself through this process?

Merhige: Sure, but also for the viewer's experience of *seeing* the film.

MacDonald: One of the things that I think keeps the audience in the theater is that you can't quite see what you're seeing. The combination of the strange characters and actions and the dense texture creates movements and rhythms that you can't quite identify. We think, "Oh God, that looks like a rape!" but we're not sure.

Merhige: It's amazing. A member of the audience will always come up after the film and say, "You know, there were a couple scenes that I didn't understand." I'll ask the person, "Well, what do *you* think was going on?" They will invariably say exactly what I scripted. They've *never* misinterpreted it. There's a very peculiar and fascinating psychological process going on, of simultaneous release and repression. On the one hand, they *see* it, but on the other hand, they don't want to see it. These polarities are at odds with each other. I'm sure many people feel, "This film could mean different things to different people." And in some ways it does, but it's

not like you just provide your own meaning to the material — not at all. There is a story being told and everybody *is* getting it, but whether you choose to talk about it is another issue.

MacDonald: Since the first time through we have no particular identifications for any of these characters at least until the credits, all we can do is see them as generic actors in some kind of primal activity.

Merhige: They are what they are on the screen, but they also function as metaphors for forces at work within our society, that seem at one moment ready to just tear our world asunder and the next moment willing to allow us a few more days. As a society, we're on a kind of precipice now, where we all feel this anxiety about where we're going. Life is simultaneously renaissance *and* imminent disaster, whether we're talking about forces of man against man, or man against nature.

MacDonald: My class [a class in horror film at Utica College] and I developed a rough allegorical plotline for *Begotten*: God (the idea of God) dies giving birth to (the idea of) Nature, or God-as-Nature; and then Mother Nature is raped, but survives and continues as best she can. These events suggest a historical overview of attitudes popular in North America and Europe during the past few centuries. Is this anything like what you had in mind?



Merhige: The fact that *Begotten* conjures the ideas outlined by your class discussion *is* the story. *Begotten* is a chrysalis made of archetypal materials, gestures, and forces that defy the “moral” and rational structure of meaning. The film is a launching pad for the mind, a “watering hole” where the imagination drinks to intoxication. The drama of *Begotten* is in the anthropomorphic rendering of forces that nobody can

touch or see, but are there right at the edge of every moment — in the film, they're right at the edge of your perceptions. The twentieth-century mind has become estranged from the very foundation of creation. *Begotten* is not new; it finds its home in histories and ages when the Imagination was not fantasy, but in fact the substance of God. The historical narrative you've mentioned is the voice of the collective Imagination. This is precisely how *Begotten* works: it activates a bridge that runs between universals and individuals. In other words, your narrative is part of the same process that produced *Begotten*.

MacDonald: You shot *Begotten* in the Poughkeepsie [New York State] area?

Merhige: South of Poughkeepsie on construction sites, and in New Jersey and on Long Island. I befriended a few of the construction engineers and they were very helpful. During every step in the film, I found that obstacles that seemed insurmountable were overcome. I worked with some of the nicest people you could imagine, and I met amazing people as we produced the film.

MacDonald: Did you shoot the time-lapse material at the end?

Merhige: Yes.

MacDonald: At first, the viewer doesn't know what the scale is.

Merhige: Those little sprouts look like trees, and then in the next shot you see trees. The idea of perspective was very important to me in making the film. Where is up? Where is down?

Is it day or night; is that the sun or the moon? There are moments in the film where I shoot a few millimeters of space, yet it looks like a canyon. And there are moments when the characters are so dwarfed by the landscape that you're wondering, "Is this animation?" At the end, when you see the farmers, they look huge, imposing, like giant mushrooms erupting out of the earth.

MacDonald: In general, how has *Begotten* been received?

Merhige: The audience's reaction to the film has been one of the most profound lessons I've ever gotten, both as an artist and as a human being. I've learned not only from people who have been very passionately in love with the film, but from people who have passionately hated



the film: especially when they've written why they hated the film, they've been able to reveal all sorts of amazing stuff that I was not consciously in touch with at the time. That kind of relationship with an audience is very special and hard to describe. I love the opportunity to present *Begotten*. A lot of people last night really got what this movie is about. And what it's about is very complex. That's amazing — it really is.

When I finished the film, I felt sure it would be misunderstood and consigned to the underground again. I see it as a very serious, very beautiful work of art, but when it was first finished, I was always thinking, "What if everybody just laughs? What if they don't see anything in it?" There was always that possibility. The film is saying everything and it's a hairline away from saying nothing. Of course, that's its power and life: *Begotten* is right on the edge between snow on your television set and storytelling.

I've always felt very strongly that the film is alive, organic. I've seen it over and over again, and discover different things all the time. It's as if the film is constantly giving birth to itself, constantly metamorphosing. I figure that if I feel that way about it, then certainly other people can, too.

MacDonald: Were particular films helpful to you in thinking through this project?

Merhige: *The Seven Samurai* [1957] was inspiring: Kurosawa's work in general, because of the explosiveness of each frame. I was very affected by Georges Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* [1949], which I saw at your homage to Cinema 16 at Film Forum in 1988 (I went to that program more than once), and Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* [1971]. And certainly *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1919] I've always admired its obsessiveness, its creation of an obviously fictional, but somehow real town. That certainly had an effect on how *Begotten* creates its own world, a world that exists somewhere deep in the imagination and somewhere underneath our landscape...

MacDonald: And in a sense somewhere underneath conventional cinema?

Merhige: Yes.



E. Elias Merhige — Biography

E. Elias Merhige received his Bachelor in Fine Arts in Motion Picture Directing in 1987, graduating at the top of his class from the film conservatory at the State University of New York at Purchase. His critically acclaimed debut feature *BEGOTTEN* was hailed by Time Magazine as "One of the Top Ten Films of the Year" in 1991.

Originally from New York, Merhige has directed many works for the theatrical stage. Among these are Strindberg's "A Dream Play," Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," and Beckett's "Endgame," some of which were performed for the Ghent Theater in Belgium.

Following *BEGOTTEN*, Merhige found himself in great demand for music videos. One noteworthy collaboration was with Marilyn Manson, who contacted him to create his stage designs, direct an intermission film for the live concert, and direct a music video for the title song from the album "Anti-Christ Superstar," which won a Golden Gate award at the San Francisco International Film Festival. Besides his directing, Merhige has lectured on aesthetics at the Carnegie Mellon Museum and the American Film Institute in Washington, D.C.

Merhige's most recent film is *SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE*, starring Willem Dafoe and John Malkovich.





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